



DECISION MEMO

North Fork Aspen Regeneration



USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
Nez Perce – Clearwater National Forest
North Fork Ranger District
Clearwater County, Idaho

I. Background

I have decided to approve North Fork Aspen Regeneration project in the Nez-Perce-Clearwater National Forests, Idaho County, Idaho. The project is located in T41N, R11E, Section 31 and T41N, R10E, Sections 35 and 36, Boise Meridian. (See attached map).

II. Purpose and Need

Aspen is, in general, declining throughout the western U.S., including the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests. Without periodic disturbance or active management aspen clones are slowly encroached upon by the surrounding dominant conifer habitat types, until the clone is a fraction of its peak size or eventually disappears.

Mature aspen clones, though important seed sources for new aspen stand development, provide lower value habitat for wildlife than young clones. Regenerating aspen stands are important foraging areas for elk, deer, moose as well as neotropical migratory songbirds. Where their range overlaps with individual sites, the clones provide important brood-rearing and foraging areas for wild turkey. The aspen and associated fruiting shrubs in regenerating stands also provide important summer, fall and winter forage for ruffed grouse.

Most aspen clones on the forest are of small size (2 - 20 acres) due to a number of factors. The small size however provides opportunities to efficiently double or triple the acreage by removing in-clone and adjacent competing vegetation at the same time as the mature clone is being cut to reset the seral clock. Regenerating and expanding the existing aspen clones is needed to maintain an important component for wildlife and overall habitat diversity on the forest.

Project Design / Equipment: Up to six mature aspen stands/clones (approximately 150 acres; see Table below) will be treated by in the Birch Ridge area between Forest Service Road (FSR) 720 and FSR 250. Treatments will occur during the aspen dormant period, when the ground is frozen or dry; however, other times of the year will be considered, based on resource availability.

U.S. Forest Service crews using chainsaws will cut and fell the mature aspen and competing conifers within the clone, and any competing conifers adjacent to the clone where suppressed aspen regeneration, or evidence of recent aspen occurrence is present. Where adjacent aspen regeneration/evidence is not apparent, conifers downwind (prevailing wind direction) of the aspen clone will be treated within 200 feet of the clone, to expand the extent of the clone. Two to

five mature aspen trees per acre will be retained in each stand/clone to buffer against the potential of drought induced Sudden Aspen Decline.

Table: Aspen Stands to be Regenerated

Stand	Acres
01050331060059	23
01050331060061	21
01050331060064	13
01050331060065	31
01050331060027	16
01050331070017	30
Total acres	134

All treatments occur outside of existing and proposed harvest projects, RHCAs, and Old Growth. Access to the treatment sites is off of FSR 720. The project does not change access restrictions.

Treated areas will be monitored one year post-implementation to evaluate the immediate effect of the treatments. The areas will then be re-evaluated at 4-5 years post-implementation to document the presence of Sudden Aspen Decline and elk utilization of the regenerated aspen. The data will help determine which elements of the habitat treatments should be replicated elsewhere on the forest in future aspen regeneration projects.

A follow-up project, if needed, will be to prescribe burn the treated stands, likely as part of a larger landscape burn. If follow-up burning is necessary it will be proposed as a separate project.

Design Criteria include, but are not limited to:

- Cutting will occur outside of the migratory bird nesting seasons (April 15-July 15).
- Maintain a minimum 40-acre yearlong no-treatment buffer around recently occupied goshawk nest trees.
- No ground disturbing activities would be allowed in occupied post-fledgling goshawk areas in the vicinity of recently occupied nests from April 15 to August 15.
- The District Wildlife Biologist will be notified of threatened, endangered, or sensitive/rare wildlife species sightings in the project area during layout and implementation. All protection measures recommended by the wildlife biologist will be implemented.

Project Implementation: The project is expected to be completed in a single field season (September - November) starting in 2017. The project may be extended into fall/winter 2018.

III. Rationale for Decision and Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

A. Category of Exclusion and Rationale for Using the Category

Based on information in this document and the project record, I have determined this project is not significant in either context or intensity (40 CFR 1508.27), that no extraordinary circumstances affecting resource conditions exist (36 CFR 220.6), that this project may be categorically excluded

from documentation in an EA or EIS, and that it meets all the criteria outlined in 36 CFR 220.6(d)(6): *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.*

The rationale for my decision is based on: (1) the proposed action fully meeting the criteria for Categorical Exclusions, (2) the proposed action meeting the purpose and need, (3) the findings related to extraordinary circumstances, (4) the project's consistency with laws and regulations, (5) the on-the-ground review and discussion with District resource specialists, and (6) my review of the Biological Assessments (BA), Biological Evaluations (BE), and specialists' reports.

B. Finding of the Absence of Significant Adverse Effects to Extraordinary Circumstances

Based on the findings for resource conditions described below, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances are associated with my decision. Forest Service direction at 36 CFR 220.6(b) describes the resource conditions that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstance related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EIS or EA.

Additionally, 36 CFR 220.6(b) states, "*The mere presence of one of more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions and if such a relationship exists, the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist.*"

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat or Forest Service sensitive species.

The Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) Botanist determined the proposed action will have "no effect" to species listed as federally threatened or endangered, R1 Sensitive species or their habitats.

The IDT Wildlife Biologist determined the proposed action will have "no effect" to Canada lynx and "no jeopardy" to North American wolverine or their habitats. The project is within LAU 8; however, it is not within modeled Lynx habitat. The project is partially within mapped wolverine habitat; however projects of this type have been considered within the Wolverine Programmatic Assessment, Appendix A, Activity # 9 Habitat Maintenance and Restoration. The project would have no significant effects to R1 Sensitive species.

The IDT Fish Biologist determined the proposed action would have "no effect" on bull trout, steelhead trout, and fall chinook salmon, federally threatened species, because the species and designated critical habitat do not occur within the project area. The biologist also determined the proposed action would have "no impact" on R1 Sensitive species or their habitats since the species do not occur within the project area.

Based on the above assessment, no extraordinary circumstances were identified for these resources. For the complete analyses, see the Fishery, Wildlife and Botany specialists' reports in the project record.

2. Floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds.

Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds are not present within the project area. The reduction of conifer encroachment could have beneficial effects to groundwater, which could have beneficial effects to surface waters in the long term.

The proposed project is consistent with all applicable State and Federal water quality laws for water resources. The activities are also consistent with soil and water standards in the Clearwater National Forest Plan, including the PACFISH amendment.

Based on this analysis, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to floodplains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds.

3. Congressionally designated areas, such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas or National Recreation Areas.

The project area is not located in any congressionally designated area, and therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to these resources.

4. Inventoried Roadless areas or potential wilderness areas.

The project is not located in any inventoried or potential wilderness area and therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to this resource.

5. Research Natural Areas.

The proposed activities is not within to any Research Natural Areas.

6. American Indians and Alaska native religious or cultural sites.

The Forest Cultural Resource Specialist determined the project has little potential to adversely affect cultural properties, assuming such properties were present. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to native religious or cultural sites.

7. Archaeological sites or historical properties or areas.

The Idaho State Historic Preservation Officer, or the Forest Archaeologist via the use of the North Idaho Programmatic Agreement, has determined that no archaeological or historic property will be adversely affected by this project. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to these resources.

IV. Interested and Affected Agencies, Organizations, and Persons Contacted

On June 29, 2017, letters providing information and seeking public comment were mailed to individuals, organizations, a variety of state and local agencies, and the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene Tribes. Additionally, project information was also available at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/nezperce> under NEPA projects. A legal notice appeared in the Lewiston Tribune on June 30, 2017, inviting comments for 30 days from publication. Two individuals/organizations commented during the public scoping period, and their comments are addressed in Appendix A. The original letters are available in the project record.

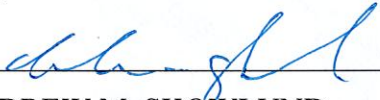
V. Findings Required by other Laws

Based on my review of the actions associated with this project, I find that the North Fork Aspen Regeneration Project is consistent with applicable Federal, state and local laws and regulations, including the standards and guidelines contained in the 1987 Clearwater National Forest Plan, as amended, as required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976.

VI. Contact Person

Questions regarding this decision should be sent to Jeff Chynoweth, Small NEPA Team Planner, c/o Nez Perce – Clearwater Supervisor's Office, 903 Third Street, Kamiah, Idaho 83536 or by telephone to (208) 935-4260 or FAX at (208) 935-4275 during business hours (M-F, excluding Federal holidays, 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., PST).

VII. Signature of Deciding Officer



ANDREW M. SKOWLUND
District Ranger
North Fork Ranger District

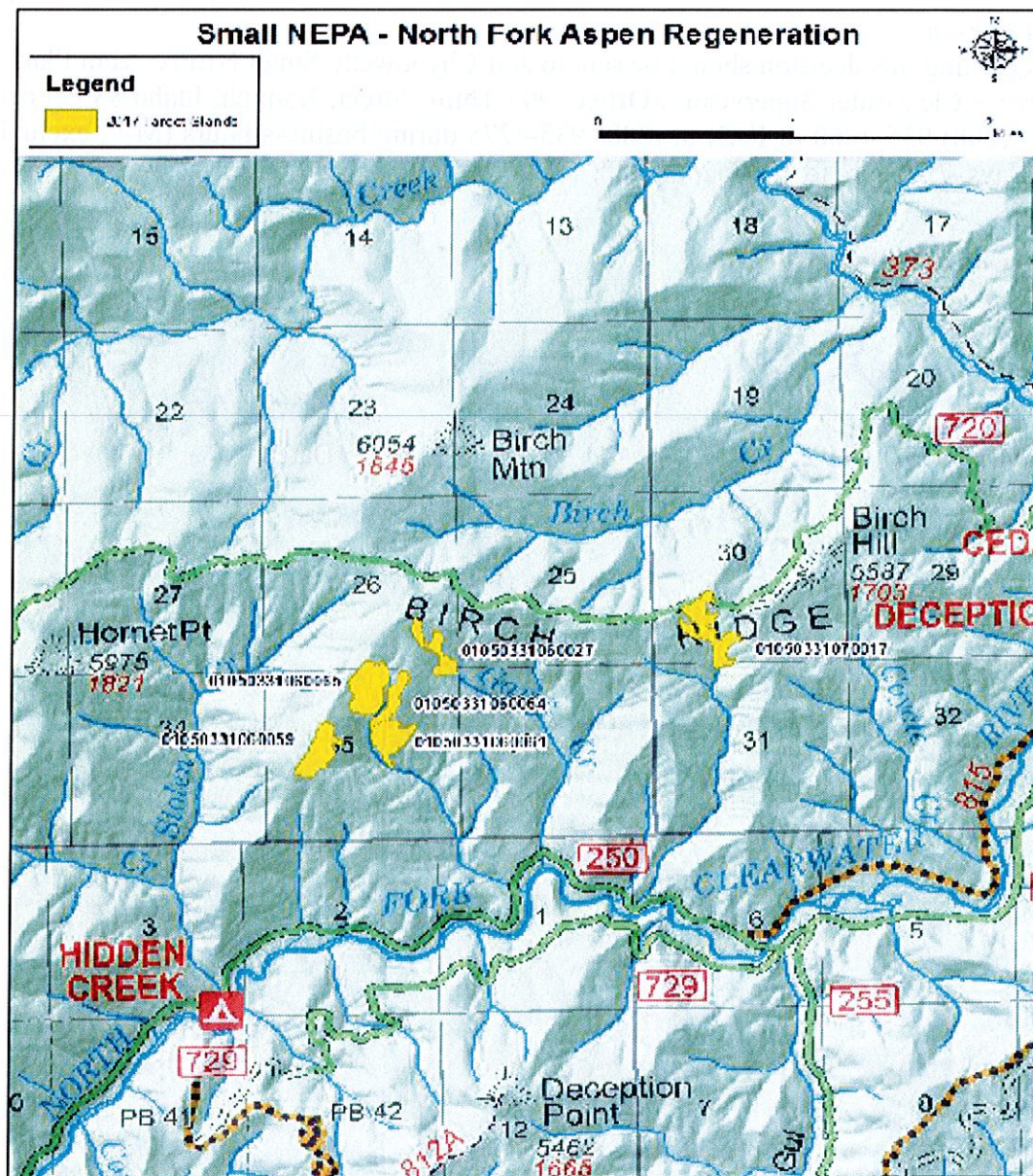
10/26/17

Date

cc: Jim Lutes, Mike Pruss

Enclosures (1): Map

Map for the North Fork Aspen Regeneration Project



Appendix A

Analysis of Scoping Comments

North Fork Aspen Regeneration Project

Two individuals/organizations commented during the public comment period of June 29, 2017 to July 31, 2017. The disposition of the comments are found in the Table below. The original comment letters are available in the project record.

Comment Analysis

Commenter	Comment	Disposition
Gary Mcfarlane Friends of the Clearwater	Nowhere in the forest plan or ... the Forest Service's Forest Habitat Types of Northern Idaho: A Second Approximation (GTR INT-236) is aspen even mentioned.	<p>Although aspen is not specifically mentioned in the Forest Plan, the Forest Plan (Forest Goals, Wildlife 5.a, p. II-2) directs the forest to, "Provide habitat for viable populations of all indigenous wildlife species" Because aspen provides habitat for elk and other big game, as well as other wildlife species, such as Neotropical migratory birds, management of aspen, as proposed, is consistent with the Forest Plan.</p> <p>Aspen is identified in GTR INT-236 by its scientific name, <i>Populus tremuloides</i>. On page 1 of the report it states, "<i>Populus tremuloides</i>-dominated stands were considered to be short-lived seral stages; hence, no potential climax series was recognized for this species." While aspen is not discussed further in the report, this statement indicates that aspen, as a short-lived seral stage, was present in Northern Idaho, including the NP-CLW National Forest.</p>
Brad Smith, Idaho Conservation League	The Idaho Conservation League supports the proposed regeneration of aspen stands on Birch Ridge. In fact, we encourage the Forest Service to think bigger and explore more aspen regeneration opportunities on a larger scale.	Thank you for your support.

